



BEAGHMORE

BEAGHMORE Stone Circles and Alignments and CREGGANCONROE Court Grave

English Translation

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and

CREGGANCONROE

Court Grave

County Tyrone

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This group of megalithic monuments, surrounded by moorland covered with peat and heather, is on the southern fringe of the Sperrin Mountains at about 195 metres (640 feet). The site was first discovered in the 1930s by the late George Barnett of the Six Towns. Archaeological excavation, begun by the late A. McL. May of Coleraine in 1945, removed the concealing peat from a large part of the area, and as a result stone circles, stone alignments and small round cairns, all intimately interrelated, were laid bare. All are either built on or inserted in the soil beneath the peat. Most of the stones of both circles and alignments are less standing stones with their bases sunk in the ground than small boulders placed on the ground. The surrounding peat has been prevented from encroaching again on the site by extensive drainage works.

The circles are mostly built of quite small stones. Circles A and B, encountered first by the visitor approaching from the road, have stones from 0.3 to 0.6 m. high. Circle C, with widely spaced stones, has a markedly flattened W. side where it almost meets its twin, Circle D, which is more regular in plan and has somewhat closer set stones of similar heights. Circle E, the site's largest, has no balancing twin. Its stones, too, are the largest: the tallest stands 1.2m. high and most of its fellows reach 0.9 m. A round cairn is absorbed within it and the rest of its interior is completely filled with close-set stones which were given the name of 'dragons' teeth' by their excavator. A more or less central dragon's tooth has a height of 0.8 m. F and G, the smallest circles, are mostly built of stones 0.45 to 0.66 m. high. In Circle G are two large stones, 1.2 m. high which, with a wide intervening gap, are opposite the inner end of the associated stone alignment.

Alignments or Stone Rows

Each of the main circle units has at least one alignment or 'stone row', their inner ends sited at or near a small round cairn which is near the point where paired circles approach each other most closely. All the longer rows are composed of many quite small stones. Four rows are linked to Circles A and B. The outermost two of these are built of small, low stones set close together. The inner pair of alignments here are of much larger stones, the tallest standing 1.35 m. above ground. Three alignments run from Cairn 2, between Circles C and D, the longest of these extending well

outside the boundary fence for a total distance of 88 m. Roughly parallel with this is a short line of 5 stones more massive in all respects, with heights of 1.00 m. to 1.24 m. Circle E has one row of small stones alongside which is set a parallel line of three large ones (shown in our title illustration), while a single row of very small, closely set stones is associated with Circles F and G.

Cairns

A dozen small round cairns are scattered over the cleared area, four (nos. 1, 2, 6 and 10) closely associated with the circle and alignment pattern. The most southerly of these, Cairn 10, is far enough removed from the circles to give room for an encircling ring-ditch with external bank. All the cairns had kerbs of small boulders and most contained traces of cremated bone. Cairn 1 had a neatly built central cist in which was found a polished stone axe-head of porcellanite, a rock which was made into axe-heads at Tievebulliagh and Rathlin Island in Co. Antrim.

The Meaning and Function of the Structures

Stone circles and alignments are widespread in the British Isles and further afield, and the Beaghmore structures like all the others invite explanation. Why were so much land, time and energy devoted to them? The answers given to such questions can never be anything better than a weighing of probabilities. The combination of circles and tangential alignments is matched at various other sites in Co. Tyrone. Many, but by no means all, stone circles appear to have been located and designed as pointers to parts of the horizon which saw the rising or setting of the sun, moon and various stars. It is interesting to note that George Barnett, the discoverer of Beaghmore, as far back as 1954, thought that the site was a lunar observatory for calendrical calculations. As can be seen from the plan, four of the tangential alignments bear 40° to the east of true north, as though aligned on that part of the horizon where the midsummer sunrise occurs.

Other Features

It will be noted that four more or less straight bands of very small stones can be seen on the ground in addition to the features already described: one to the east of Circles A and B, one between Circles A-B and C-D, one north-east of Circles F and G, and one running north-east from Cairn 9. Their date and function are unknown though it looks as if two of the alignments from Circles A and B run over the first band mentioned, suggesting that they pre-date the alignments. The most likely explanation is that they are the boundary banks of an earlier field system, made from unwanted stones picked off the fields.

Dating

Excavations were carried out in 1965 with the object of relating the stone structures to the vegetational history of the site and by means of radiocarbon dating to say at what period the stone structures were built. Pollen analysis of the covering peat told a story of changing vegetation over the last 7000 years. Though the landscape is now so treeless, at the beginning of that period the vegetation consisted largely of forest trees, including birch, pine, willow and hazel. The earliest time at which human intervention appears is around 3500 B.C, when most of the forest trees decline in numbers and grasses and some herbs become abundant and pollen of cereals is seen for the first time – a reflection presumably of the rise of Neolithic agriculture and stock rearing. The heather which is now a dominant plant became significant only from 2000 B.C. onwards, achieving its greatest importance in the first 500 years A.D.

The field system noted above is presumably of Neolithic age, like a small hearth found within Circle C which contained some sherds of plain Neolithic pottery. Cairn 10 has been dated (in round figures) to some time between 1500 and 800 B.C. Presumably the associated circles and alignments share the same dating. The main features of the site would thus have been built in the Bronze Age.



CREGGANCONROE COURT GRAVE

This is a good example of a typically northern Irish chambered grave dating from Neolithic times. Over 300 comparable graves are known, scattered over the northern half of the country, while closely related tombs are also found in south-west Scotland and the Isle of Man. It is sited in a countryside of long ridges of sand and gravel, known as eskers, left by the retreating glaciers of the Ice Age, at an altitude of just over 200 m. The surrounding cairn is approximately rectangular in plan, about 30 m. long by 15 m. wide, composed of rather large boulders, now presenting a ragged outer edge; any kerbstones have presumably rolled or been moved downhill. The two-segment burial gallery opens on to a forecourt at the E. end. It has side stones which now stand to heights of 0.53 to 1.47 m. above the present level of the gallery floor; those of the inner segment are noticeably lower than those of the outer. One of the pair of jamb-stones which subdivide the gallery is in position but the other has fallen. The gallery is wide (2.25 m.) in the outer segment and was originally roofed with capstones. One of these survives, its outer edge still supported by the portal stones and its inner edge fallen to ground level. The tops of the portal stones were apparently originally spanned by a narrow lintel stone which now stands, displaced, on end between them.

In the rear of the cairn are two lateral chambers whose side and end stones rise from 0.50 to 0.91 m. above the present level of their floors. It will be noted that the entrances to these subsidiary chambers are provided with portal stones and to this extent, at least, show the same design principles as the main burial gallery with its entrance narrowed by a pair of portal stones.

This cairn must have been the burial place for a group of people living and farming in this area, somewhere between 3000 and 2000 B.C. It has not been excavated, but excavation would probably reveal cremated bone or concentrations of phosphate in the burial chambers to indicate the former presence of unburnt bones which have been destroyed by acid soil conditions. With the burials could be broken hand-made pottery (round-based bowls or cups), a few flint implements and perhaps a stone bead or two.

Further Reading

On Beaghmore: May, A. McL. In *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 83 (1953), 174-197 and Pilcher, J.R. in *Ulster J. Archaeol.*, 32 (1969), 73-91. On Cregganconroe: deValera, R. in *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.* 60C (1960), 9-140 and Evans, E.E., *Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland* (1966).

Access Beaghmore (grid ref. H685841): take Cookstown to Omagh road to point about 14 km. W. of Cookstown, where signpost points N. to Beaghmore site, reached after a further 4 km. Of narrow, twisting roads.

Cregganconroe (grid ref. H663758): take minor road from Pomeroy NW. to Cam Lough, then turn left about 1 km. Short of S. end of Cam Lough.